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Staging the Twitter War

Toneelgroep Amsterdam's Roman Tragedies

James R. Ball III

On 14 November 2012, following an intensification in rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip targeting Israel, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) made their first formal announcement that military operations against Gaza had recommenced: at 9:29 AM eastern standard time, @IDFSpokesperson (the IDF's official Twitter presence) tweeted, "The IDF has begun a widespread campaign on terror sites & operatives in the #Gaza Strip, chief among them #Hamas & Islamic Jihad targets" (2012a). Minutes later @IDFSpokesperson tweeted their first target, the Hamas leader Ahmed al-Jabari, and within an hour had given what would become a week-long war its name: "The IDF has embarked on Operation Pillar of Defense" (2012b). The IDF Twitter feed soon became its own front in the battle as a locus for many of the speech acts that compose and surround war. Included in the declarations tweeted that morning: "All options are on the table. If necessary, the IDF is ready to initiate a ground operation in Gaza." "We recommend that no Hamas operatives, whether low level or senior leaders, show their faces above ground in the days ahead" (2012c; 2012d).

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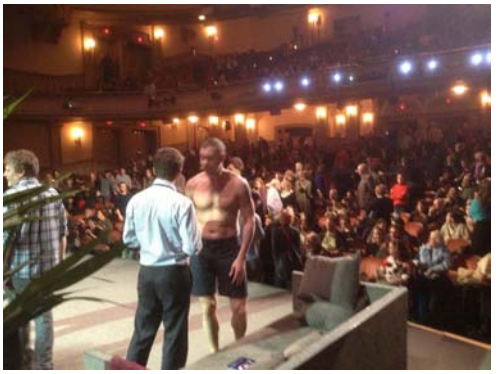

Figures 1 & 2. Toneelgroep Amsterdam's Roman Tragedies *as seen from the house (left) and the stage (right). (Courtesy of Daniel Dinero)*

Hamas, the Palestinian political organization that has administered Gaza since 2007, returned fire in cyberspace via the Twitter account of its military wing, the Al Qassam Brigades. @AlqassamBrigade matched threat for threat, tweeting "Liberation of occupied #Palestine started...we are coming #IDF" (2012a) and challenged the IDF's characterization of events whenever it could. Responding to @IDFSpokesperson's "Warning to reporters in Gaza: Stay away from Hamas operatives & facilities. Hamas, a terrorist group, will use you as human shields" (2012e), @AlqassamBrigade offered, "Warning to Israelis: Stay away from Israeli #IDF = #IOF [Israel Occupation Forces] and bases. IDF, a terrorist army, will use you as human shields" (2012b). Commentators would soon describe these discursive and narrative battles, playing out in volleys of 140 characters or less, as the world's first Twitter war (see Schachter 2012; Sutter 2012).

From 16 to 18 November 2012, a different Twitter war could be found onstage at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM): Toneelgroep Amsterdam's *Roman Tragedies*, directed by Ivo van Hove. The nearly six-hour long, intermission-free spectacle cut together three of Shakespeare's Rome-set tragedies: *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. By reducing each play to as few as 90 minutes, van Hove emphasized interpersonal conflict and human intrigue (for instance, Coriolanus's fraught relationships with his mother, wife, and son, and Antony and Cleopatra's romance), allowing each play's political plots to emerge in abstractions (drums and strobe lights to indicate war), allusions (a uniform of suits and ties to suggest 21st-century political classes), and the structures by which each spectator's gaze, body, and engagement were managed. A handy flyer distributed to playgoers at the outset contained a scene schedule marking the times at which each of the three plays' scenes (in their original sequence) would occur. It also featured the call to (digital) action, "You are encouraged to take pictures and tweet using the hashtag #RomanTragedies." Audience members could then follow the new media commentary from their devices or on an LED ticker that broadcast curated selections to those seated in the house. Many had already entered into this form of digital participation before receiving the production's blessing: as the audience waited for doors to open, user @cynthiayang tweeted "Even the lobby experience is immersive: general admission can turn sextigenerians into gladiators #RomanTragedies" (Yang 2012).

The flyer further identified set changes between certain scenes denoting the moments in which audience members could circulate from house to stage or back again, finding new vantages among the couches, televisions, and risers that were set on the stage. When the audience was first allowed onto the stage (soon after Coriolanus returned triumphant to Rome), the twitterati marveled at their access, "@natty_ijs we're on stage! Come to Rome! #RomanTragedies" (Frisbie 2012), and bemoaned the new conflicts it sparked,

Figure 3. Audience members circulate during a set change. On the LED feed, from a CNN report on Gaza: Small boy killed in the crossfire. (Courtesy of Daniel Dinero)

"@planetaclaire apparently there's no more space in Rome #RomanTragedies" (natty_ijs 2012). Those with the best views took on certain journalistic responsibilities, as did tweeter @sbishopstone who captured the "End of Coriolanus #RomanTragedies pic.twitter.com/KOvZ99iU" (Bishop-Stone 2012a). As the carnage mounted, photographic evidence proliferated.

Twitter also became a venue for reflection and analysis. As Marc Antony wept over Caesar's corpse (a scene staged as a 21st-century press conference), tweeters waxed philosophical: "Lessons Julius Caesar taught me: Don't try to be a god and people won't try to stab you. #RomanTragedies" (Lorenzetti 2012). For some spectators, Twitter provided opportunities for *Roman Tragedies* to stitch itself into the fabric of the wider world. A few dutifully reported the moment the show spilled out beyond the opera house walls, Enobarbus running out through the audience onto Lafayette Avenue—"The cast literally moved out onto the street #romantragedies. Brilliant" (Verkerk 2012)—or offered their own analysis of the gesture—"Poor Enobarbus. It just wouldn't be Ivo van Hove if an actor didn't run out into traffic followed by a camera. #RomanTragedies" (Bishop-Stone 2012c). Still others on twitter drew attention to the ways the outside world encroached upon the staged history, as contemporary news briefs would also be featured on the LED ticker above the stage: "#RomanTragedies live news of Israel/Hamas during Coriolanus" (Kanthou 2012).

Geoffrey Way identifies three primary modes in which social media have been integrated into live performance: "social media as a means for access, social media as a means for participation, and social media as platforms for dramatic performances" (2011:403–4). Way's categories mark several opportunities for theatre artists to use social media to encourage engagement with an audience—from providing views of a rehearsal process, to promoting interaction between audiences and performers

or characters, to serving as venue. Nonetheless, Way's examples offer scant evidence that the incorporation of such new media into live, stage dramas is or will become anything more than fad. Yet for *Roman Tragedies* Twitter proved essential: the play modeled a particular form of 21st-century spectatorship by incorporating the microblogging service, and by deftly navigating between the modes Way identifies. These modes further offer a conceptual apparatus that can clarify the formal similarities between the use of Twitter in war and in theatre. The IDF Twitter feed had long shown glimpses of the forces that would deploy in Operation Pillar of Defense and each tweet invited participation by others who could re-tweet or respond. Once Hamas responded, Twitter became a venue for the verbal spectacle produced by two political actors, and those following the feeds were once more spectators. As spectator to *Roman Tragedies*, I found myself a theatrical analog to this audience for global politics—an audience with fractured access to the spectacle of world affairs and an oscillating engagement with its players and events. Such spectators play a crucial role in piecing together the narratives that render geopolitical events meaningful, but feel largely powerless in spite of this capacity; I am immersed in the drama though I participate in it only rarely.

This effect is not solely a function of the ways in which *Roman Tragedies* extends itself into digital realms. As the dramas onstage oscillated between an intimate private sphere and a broadly figured public sphere, so too did the audience's physical proximity with and visual access to those spheres. At *Roman Tragedies*, this public sphere was figured by a stage space cluttered with low-slung couches in minimalist Scandinavian styles of the sort preferred by the planners and policy makers who furnish institutional spaces in Europe and North America. Once the audience was allowed onto the stage, their bodies filled this space, and produced a new intimacy that suggested more private scenes. The plays were acted naturalistically in the same spaces the audience occupied, though the production also took pains to foreground its theatrical apparatus: makeup stations and concession stands were accessible and visible from the stage, serving the immediate needs of both actors and spectators and gesturing towards the work that goes into making real-world politicians camera-ready.

The intimacy allowed spectators did not always bring greater clarity or access: since the stage featured dozens of flat-screen televisions and was embellished with a few well-placed ferns, one's view was often partial or indirect. The televisions offered live video of the play from several stationary cameras installed throughout the opera house and hand-held cameras whose operators followed the major players. The action I was trying to see might be blocked by other audience members or some furniture, or indeed be behind me entirely, requiring me to watch events happening inches from my back on a television a few feet ahead of me. When the televisions were not abstracting and doubling the audience's gaze, they served as breaches where the history of the 20th and 21st centuries invaded that of Rome: historical and contemporary news footage (of John F. Kennedy, Barack Obama, the Olympics, etc.) complemented or contrasted individual scenes, cueing particular interpretations. Each new obstruction or mediation further alienated the spectator, ultimately materializing her acts of spectatorship onstage and submitting those acts to theatrical scrutiny.

Every 20 to 30 minutes the scene would change again and many audience members would shift to seek new vantage points onstage or back in the house. With each shift the politics of engagement evolved as well; the form of spectatorship modeled by the *Roman Tragedies* was not solely visual and the play's representations went beyond the usual critique that contemporary politics has lost substance and authenticity as it has become increasingly mediated and theatrical. Being a spectator to the *Roman Tragedies* required physical choices and so had bodily effects. A particularly insidious game of musical chairs developed as audience members staked out their territory onstage. Some found an agreeable couch and refused to budge from it for the duration. Others became strategic, closely watching the countdown clocks that marked each scene change, waiting for an open seat to appear. Territorial maneuvering began to occupy more

Figure 4. Contextual information presented on an LED ticker. (Courtesy of Dan Dinero)

and more of the spectator's energy, and a zero-sum game of maintaining one's hold on a spot of turf developed: many shifted in place to optimize a changing view of the scene without relinquishing a claim to space or property. The political conflicts depicted found physical analogs in an audience that grew increasingly restless and divisive, clashing in subtle ways over an extremely limited resource. For the audience onstage, spectatorship became a battle: it required each spectator to stake her territory, assert a particular view, and maintain that view in the face of forces who would take it from her.

The onstage audience was returned to the house for the final hour of the proceedings. To those gazing at the stage from the plush seats of the house throughout the event, the audience onstage formed the mass of Roman citizenry, dynamic scenery installing itself within the proscenium. Astute observers may have sensed their machinations, but the onstage micro-events were of little import alongside the macrocosmic views the house afforded. A projection above the stage space, and equal to it in size, gave the house-bound audience the same view available on each of the television screens onstage, and between the two an LED ticker, like those delivering news snippets to Times Square, offered context, history, and commentary for each of the plays (in between the contemporary news updates noted above). Key historical events not captured by Shakespeare (or cut by Toneelgroep) tracked quickly across the ticker whenever war engulfed Rome. Data and statistics took prime place here: each character's death was marked, dated, and recorded in the ticker's zooming historical record. The ticker also made tweeting spectators into participants in the construction of the historical narrative: select tweets were displayed regularly among the historical and contemporary updates. The Twitter activities of those onstage filled out the comprehensive view for those watching from the house. As certain observations passed across the ticker (such as my

Figure 5. The end of Coriolanus. (Courtesy of Sarah Bishop-Stone)

own jotting, "From the audience/house politics is history...#romantragedies" [Ball 2012]), the house view allowed for a moment of critical distance to actively construct the play's meanings as it proceeded. This, too, modeled a form of spectatorship that increasingly characterizes contemporary politics: the expert observer offering varying degrees of punditry, from professional analysts in peer-reviewed publications, to televised talking heads of dubious pedigree, to citizen bloggers interpreting for smaller constituencies. Such efforts also gestured toward the play's integration with contemporary politics, an effect made more explicit when the LED ticker would turn again to headlines from the news of November 2012, allowing Operation Pillar of Defense to make its way onto the stage at BAM.

Toneelgroep has been performing *Roman Tragedies* since 2007. The production is thus nearly as old as Twitter itself, though email was used in place of Twitter prior to May 2010 (there are still internet stations onstage where spectators can send emails but I did not see much activity at these). As a spectator in November 2012 I have trouble imagining a performance as loaded with specific resonances as those available that weekend. Certain world historical events immediately come to mind as corollaries to the intrigues represented: Coriolanus's wrangling with populism reiterated many themes of the US presidential election recently past, while Antony and Cleopatra's private decadence conjured up the sex scandal that had toppled CIA Director David Petraeus the same month. And, of course, there was also Gaza. My research into the United Nations Security Council had led me to spend that week glued to my Twitter feed, to news reports, to live video of Council media events, and the like. I had engaged precisely the form of contemporary political and historical spectatorship that Toneelgroep would model onstage at BAM. Having my own life reflected so immediately in art forced me to take stock of the ways in which my acts of everyday spectatorship form a constituent part of the contemporary political sphere. Finding myself staged as audience member shed new light on the ethics and efficacies of being an observer to global political violence.

Roman Tragedies was largely bloodless: deaths were marked by an actor falling onto a rolling platform ("Excellent use of Ekkyklema," one observer tweeted [Bishop-Stone 2012b]) and hastily photographed from above, like documentary evidence of a war crime. Between this bloodlessness and the gray, institutional space the set evoked, *Roman Tragedies* proved to be primarily interested in the antiseptic spaces where war is fought beyond the battlefield—in 2012 these are as much the Security Council chamber as the twitterverse. Far from "dramatiz[ing] the dangers of (and desire for) distraction in a hypermediated world" (Corbett and Zaiontz 2011:117), as some critical takes on the production suggest, *Roman Tragedies* in fact demonstrates the centrality of mediated spaces (old and new) in the increasingly theatricalized milieu of global politics. Neither dangerous nor safe, desirable nor undesirable, media like Twitter extend the space in which war is fought while amplifying the theatrical strategies of those who wage it. The actions of the IDF, as Operation Pillar of Defense spilled out onto Twitter's servers, demonstrated that such digital technologies are not distractions but fronts in their own right. Twitter has become one place where words and images can first be con-

tested—a particular battle that extends beyond the official cessation of hostilities. That the IDF indicated and recorded some of the bloody effects of the war in tweets also demonstrates that this front is not divorced from, or an erasure of, the physical battlefield.

Roman Tragedies deftly incorporates social media, specifically Twitter, to reflect back on its audience their place in a digital theatre of war. The audience of *Roman Tragedies* was neither invited nor authorized to intervene in the history it watched—this audience was not empowered to participate in the events as they unfolded. Rather, digital, photographic, and spectatorial engagements rendered material the usually invisible forms of participation that attend all theatre, be it on a stage in Elizabethan England or on a news broadcast from 21st-century Gaza. Spectatorship requires the active production of meaning by the spectator; in all theatre the audience must make sense of the narrative from the material immediately available to it. The integration of Twitter in the *Roman Tragedies* not only brought contemporary historical and political events onto the stage to be incorporated into the meanings made, but charged the audience with the work of writing that history in the moment.

A Twitter history is exceedingly ephemeral. On 18 November 2012, at 6:00 PM when the show began again at BAM, I logged into my Twitter account at home to experience the production once more. Following live updates of the #romantragedies hashtag, I retraced the history I had lived a day earlier, as new spectators wrote the show for me from Coriolanus's rise, to Brutus's betrayal, to the fall of Antony and Cleopatra. On 19 November, I would be back at work on my research, following Twitter now to see what end to the Gaza conflict might be in sight. Agreement was reached on a ceasefire on 21 November, and my view became historical once more—from the house—composing a comprehensive view of the scene. As an active process of making meaning, spectatorship is much the same in theatre as in war, and the lessons from each realm apply to the other. *Roman Tragedies*' reflections on the forms of spectatorship available to 21st-century global citizens suggest that how, where, and why we watch world historical events establishes our political relationship with those events and so our integration into the history they will become. Staging the Twitter war offers new ways to use theatre to do politics and write history.

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